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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000851

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [TNGD](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: A Quiet Violence: Niyazov Destroys More Neighborhoods

REF: A) ASHGABAT 679

B) ASHGABAT 387

Sensitive but Unclassified - Please Protect Accordingly.

Summary

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11. (SBU) A large neighborhood across the street from the CHG's residence has fallen victim to President Niyazov's dream of a transformed Ashgabat, this time in a particularly brutal fashion. During the weekend of July 29-30, residents were given just 24 - 72 hour eviction notices before demolition began. Bulldozers started knocking down the first houses when the time expired. According to one contact, the rush came because President Niyazov ordered the city mayor to have the neighborhood razed by "the end of the week." As a result, estimates of up to 2,500 primary residences were destroyed. The government is not violating its own laws with the short-notice evictions, but the action shows the president's maniacal disregard for the welfare and well-being of a few thousand now-homeless citizens. End Summary.

Raze First

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12. (SBU) The Ashgabat suburb of Berzengi is located 15 minutes from Ashgabat's city center at the foot of the Kopet Dag mountains bordering Iran, and has become a target for Niyazov's "White Ashgabat" construction frenzy. To accommodate his vision, the city hakimlik (mayor's office) has been tearing down established neighborhoods, leaving fields of dwarf pine saplings in the place of traditional courthouse homes and long-established gardens.

13. (SBU) The most recent example of this process was the demolition during the weekend of July 29-30 of a neighborhood located just across the street from the CHG's residence. This neighborhood (approximately one kilometer squared, but with houses extending an additional one kilometer to the southern gate of Ashgabat City) was originally zoned for vacation homes and agricultural plots, but over the course of two decades, the small vacation homes evolved into primary residences. Although the land laws did not change, the neighborhood became an established community of up to 2500 large homes complete with mature gardens. According to a city hakimlik employee, President Niyazov ordered the city mayor to have the neighborhood razed by "the end of the week" during his July 25 trip to open the new Turkmenistan-Iranian Gowdan-Bagjiran border-crossing checkpoint. Residents of this community were given two-day eviction notices and, because homeowners did not have titles to their land or specific governmental permission to construct permanent dwellings,

residents will not be compensated for their losses. One resident, a government employee, told Pol Asst that her family knowingly constructed their house and this was a fair consequence.

In the Wake  
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¶4. (SBU) On July 31, Pol Off visited the congested neighborhood of shell-shocked residents watching their homes be torn apart by an army of hired laborers and city workers. The unpaved roads were blocked by private and public vehicles, and large trucks were deployed to collect the used construction materials. While some houses were totally leveled, other houses remained with people inside the courtyards and car parks disemboweling the furnishings and organizing construction materials into stacks. (Comment: It was obvious that some people had better "connections" to stall the bulldozers while their neighbors were the early targets; the destructive pattern was mostly one residence after another in successive order. End Comment.) The scene was one of utter destruction. A city employee told Pol Asst on July 29 that government employees were deployed to the area over the weekend to provide "moral support" to the newly dislocated population. She clarified that the support was meant to encourage people to pack their belongings quickly and vacate the premises. One local teacher reported that teachers from his school were sent to the site to help clean up the mess the morning of July 29.

Carpetbaggers from the North and East  
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¶5. (SBU) Residents were sitting in front of what used to be their homes, amid piles of rubble and salvaged construction materials. There were stacks of house furnishings strewn along the street sides. Pol Asst was told previously that demolished housing

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materials from desperate Ashgabat residents are priced so low that people come from Mary and Dashoguz Welayats (regions) to fill their trucks. Business deals were visibly being conducted throughout the neighborhood. Pol Off attempted to talk to several neighborhood residents, but fear and haste were the hallmarks of the conversations. Two men identified themselves as owners of a house being demolished, but refused to speak directly to Pol Off and asked that she "go further down the road where you will find people willing to talk to you." A weather-beaten husband and wife eating bread in front of one pile of rubble said they were ready to answer any question. They planned to sleep on their foundation that evening to protect (for sale) what little remained of their 18-year investment. Twice the husband broke out in tears and openly cursed the president. He asked, "Why should what one person built over 18 years be totally destroyed by another person in one day?"

Thank the Lord  
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¶6. (SBU) In a new twist even local residents found ludicrous, on August 8, city officials and police gathered at the site of the demolished neighborhood and conducted an elaborate Turkmen-Islamic "Huday Yoly" (Sacred Path) celebration, sacrificing a lamb to thank God for the successful completion of the demolition. Neighboring residents told Charge, they could not believe their eyes when word got out that city officials actually were celebrating the demolition. As one ethnic Russian wag pointed out, "they're just happy they weren't killed."

More Traditional Demolition  
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¶7. (U) Meanwhile a more traditional demolition continued in the neighborhood across from the ice palace at the intersection of Turkmenbashi and Archabil Avenues. Houses and apartment buildings have been steadily destroyed here for months. Residents of the apartment buildings apparently received their housing during Soviet times through their work at the government Geology Agency. Residents from this neighborhood likely received longer advance notice and the promise of compensation. Nevertheless, the scenes of

destruction were similar: traffic jams of earthmoving vehicles and trucks hauling away whatever could be scavenged and residents staring out of the debris of their former homes.

Comment

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[¶](#)6. (SBU) Demolitions in Ashgabat are not new. For years, monolithic white marble apartment buildings have sprung up around the old neighborhoods, and residents knew they would be displaced. While all agree that the July 29 shock-demolition is technically legal under Turkmenistani law, however, it nonetheless demonstrated Niyavov's brand of brutal omnipotence, sacrificing his subjects' modest traditional daily lives in the quest for a ghoulish vision of modernism.

BRUSH